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SECURITY INFORMATION

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

19 May 1953

SUBJECT: NIE-96: THAILAND'S ABILITY TO WITHSTAND COMMUNIST PRESSURES  
OR ATTACKS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the political, economic, and armed strength of Thailand, with particular reference to Thailand's ability to withstand external or internal Communist pressures or attacks.

CONCLUSIONS

- a. As a consequence of the recent Viet Minh incursion into neighboring Laos, Thailand's previous immunity from Communist pressure has probably been ended.
- b. The political and economic situation in Thailand is not, on the whole, vulnerable to Communist exploitation. However, there are latent weaknesses which could become aggravated under great pressure and lead to a capitulation by the Thai leadership.
- c. Thailand's armed forces possess only modest capabilities for dealing with Communist insurrectionary activities or armed invasion.

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d. We believe that Thailand has the capability to withstand the kind of Communist pressure or attack that is likely to be directed against it in the immediate future, namely, infiltration across the Laotian border and intensified political warfare.

e. However, if the Communists were successful over a longer period in firmly consolidating their position anywhere along Thailand's borders, the situation would be drastically altered. Unless Thai leaders became completely convinced that outside, preferably US, aid to Communist aggression would be immediate and effective, they would probably capitulate to Communist pressure, hoping to salvage what they could.

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## DISCUSSION

### I. THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THAILAND

1. The effects of recent events in Indochina. Thailand's previous immunity from Communist pressure has probably been ended as a consequence of the recent Viet Minh incursion into Laos which has a common border with Thailand of over \_\_\_\_\_ miles in length. Although the bulk of the Viet Minh troops that invaded Laos in April 1953 has apparently withdrawn northward for the present, Communist prestige and strength in Laos have been increased as a result of this invasion. Some Communist consolidation will undoubtedly take place in the overrun portions of Laos in coming months. Further Viet Minh attacks against lightly defended areas of Laos will probably take place following the end of the current rainy season late in 1953. The Viet Minh will probably also intensify guerrilla operations and agent infiltrations along the frontier. In addition, the USSR and Communist China may, in pursuit of a long range Communist design to develop unrest in Thailand and ultimately gain control of all Southeast Asia, seek to derive maximum advantage from the Laos success by subjecting Thailand to political and economic pressures.

2. The Thai Government has reacted to the Viet Minh invasion of Laos by increasing its army, police, and air force strength in the northeastern provinces bordering Laos. The government intends to evacuate

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400-500 known Viet Minh leaders and several thousand youth of military age from among the largely pro-Communist Vietnamese minority residents of the border area. However, because of the length of the Laotian border, the size of the Vietnamese minority, and the modest strength and effectiveness of available Thai military and police forces, these measures will not completely close the border or fully secure the Thai border regions.

3. Political Strength. The political situation in Thailand does not on the whole lend itself to Communist subversion. Although government officials occasionally make neutralist gestures, a pro-Western sentiment apparently exists throughout the government and the public at large, and Thailand has committed troops to Korea. Moreover, Thailand possesses a considerable degree of internal political stability. The government appears to maintain effective control over a populace which gives it support in general. The royal family, which is a symbol of unity in Thailand, has great prestige and popularity. Because of a long tradition of independence, no strong anti-colonial grievances, like those in other Southeast Asian countries, exist in Thailand.

4. Thailand does possess, however, certain latent political weaknesses, and these might become aggravated under great pressure. First, there are innumerable intrigues and plots among cliques in the government which on occasion lead to swift transfers of power. (At present, there is a struggle for political supremacy within Thailand's ruling military group, chiefly involving Premier Phibun Songgram, Police General

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Phao Sriyanon, and Army General Sarit Thannarat.) Second, Thai governments traditionally postpone necessary political and military decisions as long as possible and then make the necessary accommodations to the dominant external power of the moment. Third, there are several dissident political and ethnic groups in Thailand.

5. The most important of these groups, in the light of recent events in Indochina, is a Vietnamese (largely Annamite) minority of from 75,000-100,000 which largely occupies five provinces of northeast Thailand, bordering Laos and Cambodia. The great majority of this group is strongly sympathetic to the Viet Minh. These people supply food, money, medicines, arms, and ammunition to the Communists in Indochina. They also provide the Viet Minh guerrillas with a safe haven and a recruiting base. The second most important dissident group are the approximately 3 million Chinese in Thailand, the majority of whom are believed to sympathize with Communist China. Within this minority exists a small but vigorous Chinese Communist Party of Thailand which has about 2,000 hard-core members and perhaps as many as 100,000 supporters. The Chinese Communist Party in Thailand exerts a strong influence in the Chinese labor movement and has a moderate influence over the Chinese-language press and Chinese educational and business circles in Thailand. Other dissident groups in Thailand are the Thai Communist Party, a very small and largely ineffectual body, and the adherents of former Premier Pridi Phanomyong. Although Pridi has been

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in exile from Thailand for more than five years, he appears still to have a considerable number of supporters, particularly in the northeast, among politically-conscious Thais in government, military, business, and professional circles. Pridi's exact whereabouts is unknown, but there is reason to believe that he may be in Communist China, and the definite possibility exists that the Communist leadership may have plans, which include Pridi, for a future "Thai People's Government". Such a government might be set up in Thailand or in southern Yunnan, where the Chinese Communists have recently established a "Thai Autonomous Area."

6. Economic Strength. Thailand's economic life offers the Communists relatively little to exploit. Thailand enjoys the highest standard of living in the Far East. Taxes are low. The national debt is small. The fiscal position is sound. Thailand is free from population pressure (approximately 19,000,000 people and an area slightly larger than Spain). There is relatively little unemployment, and extreme poverty is absent. The country is relatively free from the agrarian unrest associated with oppressive forms of land tenure. Thailand has a favorable balance of trade, and sells more than 70% of its exports to the US or sterling bloc countries. Certain economic conditions do exist in Thailand, however, which under certain circumstances might assist Communist ends. These are: widespread corruption in government, the dependence of the economy on a continuation of

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good markets for its secondary exports (rubber, tin, and wolfram), the capability of the government to manipulate the country's economic life, and the restrictive nature of the regime's economic measures against the Chinese minority population.

7. Military and Police strength. Thailand's military and police forces have an estimated total strength of about 108,000. The Royal Thai Army, which shares the responsibility for defending Thailand with the National Police, numbers about 50,000. The combat effectiveness of Thai army units varies greatly, and though it remains generally low by US standards, a good deal of progress has been made under US programs of reorganization and re-equipping. The principal deficiencies of the army remain: mostly obsolete and/or inoperable arms and equipment; serious shortages in ammunition, spare parts, artillery, vehicles, and signal equipment; inadequate training; and inertia and involvement in internal politics on the part of the senior officers. No serious problems of political reliability are believed to exist within the ranks of the Thai Army. The extreme factionalism which exists throughout the officer corps, however, could seriously weaken Thailand in time of crisis. At the present time, the army's strength is concentrated in the Bangkok and Central Thailand area. Additional units have been ordered to the northeast to strengthen the approximately 10,000 army troops presently in the area.

8. The Royal Thai Air Force has a personnel complement of about 10,000. It presently has 42 piston fighters and 17 transports which

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are combat-ready. The combat effectiveness of the RTAF is low, its chief deficiencies being: equipment shortages, low serviceability rates, a very weak communications system, and small and poorly equipped airfields. The RTAF is currently patrolling the northeast borders.

9. The Royal Thai Navy is largely ineffective as a military force.

10. The Thai police force of approximately 38,000 is a national force which, in addition to normal police duties, has primary responsibility for internal security, domestic intelligence, and border patrol. In time of emergency or invasion, the police force, not the army, is mobilized and sent into action; the army is called later only if needed. However, the police establishment is not properly a fourth branch of the armed services because it has no heavy equipment, no unit-training larger than company size, and poor mobility of units larger than patrol size. Other weaknesses of the police include: intense rivalry with the army; inefficient defense planning and coordination with military and civilian authorities; a poor intelligence system;

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[REDACTED] Several hundred specially trained and equipped police are currently augmenting the 5,000-6,000 police regularly assigned to the northeast, and joint police-army patrols have been established along the entire eastern border, especially concentrated at the more vulnerable points opposite central and southern Laos.

II. THAILAND'S ABILITY TO WITHSTAND COMMUNIST PRESSURES OR ATTACKS

11. Under present circumstances, Thailand probably has the capability to withstand the kind of pressure or attack which the Communists are likely to direct against Thailand in the immediate future, namely, infiltration of agents and guerrillas across the Laotian border and political warfare. Although Thai police and military forces would probably not be able completely to suppress Communist infiltration and terrorist activities in the northeast, they would be able to contain such activities and to prevent the establishment of a secure base of Communist guerrilla operations within Thailand. Intensified Communist external threats and inducements would probably meet with little success. In the unlikely event that Communist-inspired strikes, sabotage, or insurrection should occur within Thailand in the immediate future, these activities might create considerable disruption, but would almost certainly not cause the downfall or the re-orientation of the government. Finally, given the present Viet Minh strength near the

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border of Thailand, Thai military and police forces could probably counter a Viet Minh invasion, in the unlikely event that one were attempted in the immediate future.

12. If, however, the Communists were successful in firmly consolidating their position anywhere along Thailand's borders, as the result either of Viet Minh action in Indochina or of Chinese Communist military intervention in the Shan States of Burma, the situation would be drastically altered. In that event, the amount of resistance Thailand would make to the Communists would depend primarily on whether Thailand's leaders considered that sufficient external assistance could be counted upon. Specifically, Thailand's leaders would probably be satisfied with nothing less than a US commitment to support and defend Thailand. If they were given such a commitment and were convinced that US help would be immediate and effective, we believe that most of Thailand's leaders, General Phao included, would commit the forces at their disposal to the resistance of Communist aggression.

13. If Communist power were firmly established on Thailand's borders and Thai leaders were not convinced that immediate US aid would be forthcoming, they would probably not try to resist Communist pressures or attacks. Instead, the divisive elements inherent in Thailand's political life would quickly become dominant, and Thailand's leaders would probably capitulate, hoping to salvage what they could for themselves and for Thailand.

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